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Hinduism At Century's End

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For two centuries Hinduism has exercised a powerful influence on the West through its philosophy and literature. And through western writers inspired by India, many aspects of its vision have been integrated into the popular belief system. Hinduism is now truly a world religion. Hindu migrants from India and Indonesia, as well as new converts, are to be found in all countries of the world. It appears to be an appropriate time to do stocktaking and review the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

The first issue that confronts the modern Hindu is that of self image. Due to an unfortunate posturing, Hindus often claim that: 1.) there is not a religion but rather a way of life, and 2.) Hindus do not believe in conversion. Both these premises are false and indefensible. Hinduism is a religion based on the illuminations of the Vedic rishis, as expressed in the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita and the Agamas. With its emphasis on self knowledge, the Hindu tradition celebrates diversity, but the unity underlying this diversity is apparent to each Hindu and to any objective outsider.

For all experiential systems, the problem of definition is a complex one. Thus, while the grammar of the English language has many exceptions, it does not follow that English does not exist. Likewise, science deals with a variety of models that may be deterministic or random or entail uncertainty, and it is the sum of all such investigations that constitutes the enterprise of science. Analogously, what binds Hindus together is their belief that there exists an underlying unity behind ordinary reality and it is possible to comprehend its meaning.

The claim about not wishing to convert others betrays insincerity - if not

irrationality - for if one believes in the correctness of one's views, why should not one wish to spread them? Alternatively, why not take inaction to its extreme and not even bother to teach Hinduism to one's own children? This claim is not validated by the history of Hinduism. Otherwise, how could it have spread across east and southeast Asia? This false interpretation was fostered by the orthodoxy of the fractured Hindu society of the nineteenth century, and it has led to an aloofness and self-absorption that is morally and ethically wrong, besides being against its own tradition. Hinduism has had a rich history of conversion through persuasion, debate and shastrartha - the wisdom of our scriptures.

A tradition needs to be reinvented with each generation and this requires teaching and learning by books, personal instruction and example. Modern Hinduism is yet to develop institutions that will preserve and propagate its vast storehouse of knowledge and wisdom. The modern Hindu is often misinformed - or uninformed - about his tradition and consequently relates to it in a confused manner. In India, we have produced two generations of elite who are alienated and marginalized. The violence and lack of direction we see amongst the youth there may be partly blamed on this situation.

The end of the cold war has created a potential for new disasters and ethnic and religious conflict. This is where India's universal message can be especially valuable. Bertrand Russell was a champion of the view that the western acceptance of Indian and other Oriental thought was crucial for progress.

It is perhaps not too much to expect that once the passions of societies just now emerging from the worldview of the Middle Ages are played out, mankind will enter a golden age where the emphasis will be on knowledge and the realization for every human being of his or her creative potential. It is to bring in that new millennium that the universal philosophy of Hinduism can play a significant role.

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